

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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REP. SHIELA KLINKER'S STATEHOUSE REPORT

INDIANAPOLIS – Lawmakers have given final approval to the first major piece of legislation to emerge from the 2005 session of the Indiana General Assembly amid growing concerns that many bills advancing through the process will reduce citizen involvement in government.

The House Ways and Means Committee heard testimony from Purdue President Dr. Martin Jischke recently on House Bill 1546, which I co-authored. This bill will allow Purdue University and other state higher education institutions to issue bonds for buildings and research facilities without having to obtain the approval of the General Assembly. This bill was approved nearly unanimously by the committee with a 20-1 to pass this bill to the House floor for further possible action.

Also in the Ways and Means Committee, we heard House Bill 1777. This bill increases the annual salaries of local judges and appellate court judges. It establishes a judicial salaries fee of \$19 to be collected in certain civil and criminal actions. This bill also received approval by the committee with a vote of 18-3, passing this bill to the House floor.

On the floor this week, we passed several important pieces of legislation. One of my bills (House Bill 1375) was passed by the House of Representatives on Monday with a unanimous vote. This bill allows insurance producers who are serving our country in the armed forces to get a waiver exempting them from having to fulfill continuing education requirements while serving in a combat zone. This allows insurance providers to renew their licenses on a regular basis even if they have been called to serve in the military, therefore allowing them to return to their careers upon coming home.

I also supported House Enrolled Act 1003, which speeds up the implementation of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), the entity that will be charged with leading our state's efforts at job creation and retention. I am in favor of any effort to build on the benefits that we are beginning to see through the Energize Indiana program that passed in a strong bipartisan fashion in 2003. Bringing good-paying jobs to Hoosiers will always be one of my priorities.

I also am glad that we were able to change the bill substantially to ensure that members of the IEDC's board are held accountable under state ethics guidelines and the group will have to comply with the Open Door Law and the Open Records Act.

Should the governor be able to have sole control over so many things that impact the lives of local residents? It is a question that seems to apply to several other bills that are working through the legislative process:

--House Bill 1002 would create the post of inspector general, a person selected by the governor who would have the power to file and prosecute criminal charges in any county in the state. I have concerns about the inspector general having greater authority than county prosecutors, who are selected by the voters in each county.

--House Bill 1137 would create a "state information technology chief" appointed by the governor to oversee a variety of telecommunications services that have been handled in the past by a coalition that includes representatives from libraries, public schools and universities. These services have included access to such things as distance learning courses for public

schools and allowing specialized courses like advanced math or foreign languages to be taught at several schools by one teacher with two-way video. HB 1137 gives one person the power to decide which schools have access to these advanced services, how much they will pay for them, or whether the services will be offered at all.

--House Bill 1188, which would have given the governor the power to drastically reduce citizen involvement in government by eliminating over 300 state boards and commissions that help oversee everything from education to health care to protecting children to helping older Hoosiers. The House Government and Regulatory Reform Committee has softened this proposal by ensuring there will be a legislative review before any advisory groups are eliminated.

--House Bill 1719 attempts to place the state Bureau of Motor Vehicles under private control, which would allow license branches to be closed without any chance for public input. Some of you may remember that license branches were once operated under a political patronage system, with profits going to the political party of the governor. I have concerns that HB 1719 could return us to that system of 20 years ago.

--House Bill 1703 would give the governor rather than the voters the ability to select the judges who serve in Marion County. Currently, 91 counties have the right to elect judges based on their qualifications.

It is easy to understand the interest in reducing the size of government in order to make it more efficient and responsible. All lawmakers share that goal.

These bills appear to be a series of attempts to place an increasing amount of authority in the hands of the executive branch and weaken the balance of power offered by the legislative and judicial branches of government. I am particularly worried that these measures will drastically reduce the opportunities for the citizens of Indiana to take an active role in determining the policies that benefit all Hoosiers.

We are entering the final two weeks for House bills to clear committees in our chamber. In the days to come, we expect to see a proposed biennial state budget come out of the House Ways and Means Committee.

The Governor's proposed budget will be heard in the House Ways and Means Committee next week. The Ways and Means Committee chairman, State Rep. Jeff Espich (R-Uniondale), has promised that the final budget would contain more funding for our schools. This is heartening news for those of us who have seen a number of distressing signs that schools are being forced into a financial crisis that could force teachers to be laid off, programs to be eliminated and class sizes to grow substantially.

House Democrats intend to see that Rep. Espich lives up to his promise on the budget. It will be interesting to see how he can balance those words against the governor's opposition to giving minimum guarantees in funding to schools, as well as his decision not to make up tuition support that had been promised to school corporations.